HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION

Landmark/District:	**Engine Company No. 29**	(**x**) Agenda
Address:	**4811 MacArthur Boulevard, NW**	( ) Consent
Meeting Date:	**January 26, 2012**	(**x**) Alteration
Case Number:	**12-168**	
Staff Reviewer:	**Tim Dennée**	

The applicant, the District of Columbia Department of Fire and Emergency Medical Services, with Zivic & Hurdle Architects and the D.C. Department of General Services, requests the Board's review of an application to widen and heighten the vehicle doors at the landmark firehouse.

Two years ago, the Board reviewed, and recommended approval of, two additions, minor demolition, repairs and site work.

Historical background
Engine Company No. 29 was designed by Municipal Architect Albert Harris and built in 1925, the first post-World War I fire station. It was also the first of the Colonial Revival, one-story "bungalow" engine houses and the prototype for 31 Engine on upper Connecticut Avenue. This construction campaign was intended to offer fire service to the rapidly emerging suburban areas. The one-story stations were made possible by their more expansive, suburban sites, and they offered sleeping quarters beside the apparatus bays, out of the rising truck fumes. The building now also houses Truck Company No. 5.

Proposal
The vehicle doors would be widened to twelve feet from the present width (a shade over ten feet), with their height to rise from eleven to twelve feet. The idea is to accommodate apparatus with an eight-foot-wide truck body, plus one-foot mirrors on each side and one foot additional clearance on each side. This expansion would naturally reduce the wall area and the surrounding piers and entail the reconstruction of the arches and a significant increase in the size of the fanlights (i.e., larger, replacement windows) and their extension into the gable.

The drawings suggest that the new fanlights would be covered by security screens, but the architect has reported that such screens will not actually be installed over the fanlights.

Evaluation
The District of Columbia Historic Preservation Guidelines state that:

> Creating a new opening or enlarging an existing opening in a primary character-defining wall for a window, door, through-wall air conditioning unit or other reason is almost never appropriate. If a new opening must be created, for example to make a building [more] functional, it should be located on a rear, non-character-defining wall. The size, design and detailing of the new opening should be compatible with the character of the wall.

This principle is not arbitrary or enforced without consideration of the particulars, as it is nearly always the case that the composition of the front of a building constitutes its most significant feature to the world at large. The most prominent and accessible portions of a building are those that have historically received the most care in design and quality in materials and workmanship, as owners—whether private, commercial, institutional or governmental—have traditionally had an interest in display and in the conveyance of implicit messages through architecture. The greatest scrutiny is therefore applied to the review of façade alteration when it is, in fact, a character-defining feature of the property.

The present fanlights are "special windows" as defined in the window regulations and should only be removed or replaced if necessary.

The Board has previously reviewed three door widenings, and recommended issuance of permits for such work at Engine Company 10 (1342 Florida Avenue, NE) and the other at Engine 19 (2813 Pennsylvania Avenue, SE). These were approved by the Board as sufficiently compatible. The reason in the former case was that it is a fairly simple building and probably a lesser example of the Colonial Revival style, and the material—brick—was relatively easily reworked.[1] The latter, a more architecturally significant building, offered a little more room or opportunity for widening in the sense that its rubble-stone arches were surrounded by a field of stucco, and much of the stone could remain in place. In neither case were the openings widened quite as much as the present proposal. The third review was for Engine Company No. 28, at last month's meeting. The Board concluded that the alteration there would be incompatible, and the project is going before the Mayor's Agent in February.

Where minor exceptions have been made to the strict interpretation of the guidelines, as at Engines 10 and 19, they have been in cases where the program justified the exception when weighed against the quality of the original architecture or of subsequent alterations that have been of lesser quality or significance. With the present design, the proportion of solid to void really becomes an issue, especially with the openings expanding into the front gable.

Each landmark firehouse deserves due consideration of all alternatives. In some cases, a planning solution might offer an alternative location that relieves an obsolescent but beautifully designed building from unfortunate alteration. It's even possible that there may be instances where the site itself offers the space for new, larger vehicle bays, as at Tenleytown's Engine 20 or possibly, in the future, a lot adjacent to 3 Engine on New Jersey Avenue. With a new vehicle bay being added to 29 Engine, that side addition could presumably be enlarged to accept a

[1] But the reconstruction of the arches at 10 Engine was not entirely successful, and the Engine 19 project has not yet been done.

pumper, but that would not resolve the problem, because it would leave the need for one additional door to be larger.[2]

This is the first firehouse where the proposed height of the opening has become at least as much of an issue as the width, because at most stations, second-floor framing impedes much heightening, and Fire/EMS has been satisfied with reaching twelve feet at the center of the door arch. Given the costs, it is always worth revisiting the particular needs.

D.C. Fire/EMS utilizes Seagrave apparatus, which have a standard 96-inch-wide chassis.[3] As to the height of the vehicles, Seagrave's standard Marauder II pumper, while varying somewhat because of the features added, is less than ten feet. The District purchased two aerial trucks from Seagrave in 2010, each with a "driveaway height" of 10'4", with that maximum height being the top of the cab at the rear. On the face of it, this suggests that openings need not be as tall as requested, although that assumes that the 100-foot ladder is always fully retracted.

Another consideration is how precisely to redesign this façade even assuming the expansion of the openings to the degree suggested. While there is certainly a logic to reconstructing the entire openings and just creating a new arch and installing a new, larger window above, another approach may save some cost and effort and better preserve what is there. Simply enlarging the entire openings reduces the wall space greatly and requires the trickier rebuilding of the arch—into the gable where it ought not reach, leaving a building with odd proportions. It is possible, however, to leave the arches and transoms as they are and simply widen the doors below—either by widening a foot on each side of each door or by supporting the openings and wall above with a continuous beam over both openings (and supporting it with a column at the center, if necessary). The combination of the door openings is something that was done at Engine 21 in Lanier Heights.

There is no question that such approaches would leave it obvious that the door alteration is indeed a later accommodation, but such an approach, rather than trying to make the openings fit seamlessly but disproportionately into the facade, is more consistent with American preservation philosophy, including as codified in the Secretary of the Interior's Standards.

Recommendation

The preservation law requires the Board to make a finding as to whether a proposal is compatible with the character of a designated property. To a point, it permits the weighing of the programmatic or adaptability interest versus the strict preservation interest. But the law also permits an applicant to proceed to the Mayor's Agent for a determination whether such a project is consistent with the purposes of the law, either because it is in fact compatible, or it constitutes a project of special merit. In previous cases of firehouse-door expansions and the designation of firehouses and landmarks, the likelihood of Mayor's Agent hearings on similar projects was discussed. The preservation law explicitly addresses the Mayor's Agent's review of projects at public-safety facilities: "In considering a claim of special merit, substantial rehabilitation or new construction for operational needs of a public safety facility shall constitute a public interest

[2] As it is, the planned side addition is only inches deeper than the pumpers D.C. Fire/EMS now uses, and the bay would thus have to be deepened, as well as being widened, affecting the pedestrian entrance.
[3] Their largest American competitors have standard apparatus that is even a few inches wider.

having a significantly higher priority than that of historic preservation." In other words, the Mayor's Agent can approve alterations, even if incompatible from a strictly preservation perspective, if they are found to be necessary to the operational needs.

The staff recommends that the Board advise the Mayor's Agent that the expansion of the vehicle-door openings, as proposed, is incompatible with the character of the landmark property and is thus inconsistent with the purposes of the preservation law, unless the Mayor's Agent finds the project to be necessary in the public interest.